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## Gilman, Charlotte Perkins (1860-1935)

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## Gilman, Charlotte Perkins (1860–1935)

Michael R. Hill

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an influential and sometimes controversial contributor to early American sociology. Her *Women and Economics* (1898) launched a searching feminist sociological critique of the economic position of women in patriarchal societies. The primary site for Gilman's continuing sociological work was the *Forerunner* (1909–16), a monthly journal that Gilman wrote and self-published. The socially problematic issues that Gilman explored in her works echo theoretical proposals of Lester F. Ward (1841–1913), a founding American sociologist who admired Gilman and vice versa. Ward's concept of gynocentric (i.e., woman-centered) social theory reinforced Gilman's strong belief in the fundamental rationality of women's values and social contributions. Gilman developed this perspective at length in her non-fiction works. Gilman was an early

member of the American Sociological Society, published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, was respected by contemporary sociologists, and was widely known by lay readers in the public generally.

Gilman shared the feminist pragmatist tenet, that women's values make for better societies, in common with American sociologist Jane Addams (1860–1935). Antecedent to Gilman's sprightly *Herland* saga is Addams's witty and biting essay, "If Men Were Seeking the Franchise" (1913). Addams, a friend and colleague of Gilman, described a hypothetical society of men and women in which women dominate the populace and have the political power to deny men the right to vote. Addams whimsically concluded that men cannot be allowed to share in government until they abandon their selfish and destructive ideas.

Gilman's *Herland* (1915), set in a fictional utopia populated only by women, is the first half of an accessible sociological critique of American life. *Ourland* (1916) continues and completes the *Herland* saga. In *Ourland*, Ellador (a native of Herland) and Vandyke Jennings (an American sociologist who discovered the remote Herland and subsequently married Ellador) leave the all-woman paradise so that Ellador can tour and see the "real world" for herself. Suffice it to say, Ellador is appalled and aghast at the waste, wars, and patriarchal injustices that men have perpetrated around the globe.

In addition to *Woman and Economics*, Gilman's major non-fiction sociological treatises, some serially published in the *Forerunner*, include: *Concerning Children* (1900), *Human Work* (1904), *The Dress of Women* (1915), and *Social Ethics* (1916), among others. In sum, wrote Gilman in *Social Ethics*, we have failed to teach even "a simple, child-convincing ethics based on social interactions, because we have not understood sociology."

SEE ALSO: Addams, Jane; American Sociological Association; Ward, Lester Frank

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